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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1618

INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

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RHMFUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2013

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4336

RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2148

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2584

RUEHVN/USMISSION USOSCE 2924

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001273

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD

AID/W FOR EE/EA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: BACK TO SCHOOL IN TURKMENISTAN: SOME PROGRESS BUT PROBLEMS  
REMAIN

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: September 1 marked the beginning of the school year in Turkmenistan. This new school year brought more reforms, particularly expansions to the educational system that was decimated under the country's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov. President Berdimuhamedov celebrated the opening of school by declaring September 1 Knowledge Day and opened several new school buildings. Despite some improvements, serious problems remain. The number of students studying at Turkmen institutions of higher learning has expanded, but remains small. Bribes are essential to gaining admission to universities and institutes, and some educators lack the training and materials to be effective. Overcoming the legacy of Niyazov is far more difficult than officials would dare admit.  
END SUMMARY.

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

¶3. (SBU) To great fanfare and with extensive television coverage, President Berdimuhamedov declared September 1 Knowledge Day and opened two new state-of-the-art secondary schools, equipped with smart boards, computers and Internet, and held a live Internet digital video conference to open schools outside the capital. He also participated in the opening ceremonies for the new \$35 million physics-math department building at Turkmen State University. The ceremonies and TV images emphasized the use of interactive methods in the classroom and technology. (NOTE: One teacher present reported to Embassy staff that the original Internet link for the remote opening of a school failed just before the President arrived in the computer lab. At the last minute, a link to another school was established. However, the President was not told and incorrectly believed that it was the originally scheduled school.  
END NOTE.)

HIGHER ED ADMISSIONS: SLIGHTLY HIGHER NUMBERS

¶4. (SBU) More students entered institutions of higher learning this year than last year. However, the gains were relatively small. Of the approximately 100,000 secondary school graduates in June, only 4,000 gained admission to institutions of higher education in Turkmenistan on September 1, which is an increase of 285 over last

year's figure. Attendance at vocational colleges, which offer one-year certificate courses, increased by 98 students to 1,716 for 2008. The newly opened International Relations Institute of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hosted at the former theology department of Turkmen State University, admitted 178 students, who will major in international relations, international law, and public diplomacy.

¶15. (SBU) The Russian Gubkin State Oil and Gas University opened a branch campus in Ashgabat on August 31. Co-located with the Turkmen Polytechnic Institute, the branch will initially give college preparatory courses in oil and gas drilling, oil and gas production, and oil and gas machinery to 90 students. Most of these 90 students will transfer to regular college level study in 2009.

#### STUDY ABROAD

¶16. (SBU) Nearly 2,000 Turkmen students were lucky enough to gain admission to university programs abroad on various scholarship programs, as highlighted in state media. However, the process for admissions was far from transparent or fair. Universities in Russia, Ukraine, Malaysia, Romania and Turkey accepted Turkmen students. Most or all of their expenses are covered by foreign governments, religious organizations, or major oil and gas companies operating or planning to operate in Turkmenistan. For these students, the Turkmen Ministry of Education was allowed to conduct the admission process. Test takers had to demonstrate proficiency in Turkmen and the "Ruhnama." Many reported bribery also played a role in their acceptance to such programs. Many students independently seek education in other former Soviet countries or abroad. Graduates of non-state schools in those countries are

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unable to receive recognition for their degrees in Turkmenistan.

#### GRADUATE STUDY RE-INTRODUCED

¶17. (SBU) Most departments of study in Ashgabat Universities admitted one to three students in graduate programs for the first time in ten years. These programs are undeveloped, lacking much structure. After passing a small number of courses (which lack developed curricula or syllabi) graduate students must conduct research under an advisor and complete the program in 2-3 years by having a final thesis accepted. Contrary to the intended practice, there are reported cases in which graduate students have become simple assistants to their advisors, rather than focusing on the anticipated, but poorly defined, academic program.

#### PROBLEMS REMAIN: OVERCOMING THE PAST

¶18. (SBU) According to teachers, new facilities will help as overcrowding in most schools is a serious problem with about 1.4 students for every place in school. Despite efforts to reduce teacher workloads, secondary teachers still report working two and three shifts because of slow progress in hiring new teachers. Grade school curriculum still has not been updated. Although the 10th grade was restored one year ago under President Berdimuhamedov, it was weakly implemented as merely a repeat of the 9th grade. The same appears to be true for the start of the 2008-9 school year.

¶19. (SBU) In the universities, professors report that they have to reduce valuable class time to plant trees or participate in other state-mandated non-academic activities. The updating of professional credentials is another continuing problem. For example: Soviet-educated economics professors with no re-training lecture on market economics.

#### "TUITION"

¶10. (SBU) Although higher education is officially free, bribery in academic admissions continues to play a significant role, and reportedly, the "price" for admissions has gone up this year. Competition for university placements was fierce, with nearly 7 applicants for every place available. Determined families paid between \$20,000 and \$80,000 to guarantee their child's admission. Sources reported that this not-so-hidden cost was higher this year

not just because of tougher competition, but also because of the drop in the value of the dollar to the manat, losing 40% since the beginning of 2008.

NOT ENOUGH TEXTBOOKS

¶11. (SBU) The supply of updated textbooks continues to be a problem for students in both secondary schools and universities. According to some sources, only one-third of secondary school books have been revised so far, mostly removing references to former President Niyazov and his family and inserting references to Berdimuhamedov's New Revival ideology. Meanwhile, content or methodology has changed little in these textbooks. At the university level, there are no Turkmen language textbooks available for the 18 new majors and subjects that were introduced or re-introduced into the curriculum of higher education for 2008. In some known cases, even when Turkmen texts are available, teachers and students secretly use outdated and tattered Soviet-era, Russian language texts because they are better than the Turkmen language alternatives. (NOTE: Russian texts are available. However, Turkmen is the mandated language of instruction in the vast majority of schools. END NOTE.)

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Berdimuhamedov's government launched ambitious initiatives to reform education in Turkmenistan when he took office in February 2007. He reinstated the 10th grade to secondary education, extended university education from two years to five as well as added 18 new majors to the curriculum, and started building new school infrastructure, with an emphasis on Internet access.

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These are all commendable steps. However, many of the reforms have been more difficult to implement than expected. Universities are still only for the privileged elite with connections or bribe money. New curricula have not been developed or have been weakly developed, and textbooks are lacking. The Institute of Education, whose mandate is to provide teacher training in modern techniques, is still not operational. Teachers report that they've been told to start using interactive methods, but have been provided no training, materials (aside from smart boards), or guidance on how to do so. Perhaps the hidden failure of an Internet connection (see the end of para. 3) is representative of the system-wide problem with education. Perhaps officials are so focused on keeping problems from the president that they have forgotten the purpose of the reforms altogether. END COMMENT.

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